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ABSTRACT

Applied theatre teaches community members to teach others, and helps communities process issues which directly impact them. It can also raise awareness of issues, pose alternatives, heal, challenge contemporary discourses, and voice the views of the silent or marginal. The arts become an important experience as people attempt to deal with tragic events, such as September 11th. In applied theatre work, artists generate scenarios and create opportunities for the community to respond to their pain through the theatre work. The community theatre is an applied theatre where individuals connect with and support one another, and where opportunities are provided for groups to voice who they are and what they aspire to become. The applied theatre becomes a medium through which the storytellers can step into the perspectives of others and gain entry points to different worldviews. (PM)

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The Applied Theatre

Philip Taylor[1]

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In a densely populated urban centre a terrorist attack of unprecedented proportions occurs. Two thousand people lose their lives as hijacked aircraft explode into dual towering office buildings, flaming buildings that can be seen from across the city and beyond. A panic grips the city as details slowly emerge. Schools and offices are closed, hospitals are on stand by, transit services are cancelled, telephone services are out of order. Could this really be happening?

News of those working in or near the site of the attack is desperately sought by relatives and friends. The media relays the pain and suffering to the world and stories slowly emerge of those trapped in the office buildings. News of the horrible choices: to jump from the 100th floor of a towering inferno or to die from asphyxiation? The sight of people falling to their deaths, the thud of their bodies landing on the terrace roofs, haunts the soul.

As weeks go by, the city's survivors tell of what they remember of that day, of the planes flying overhead, dangerously low, of being caught on a bus with nowhere to go, of

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desperately trying to give blood and food, of forcing one's way to the destruction site to volunteer help, of the caustic dust, of the seeming end of the world. Information gathers: the terrorists were trained in the country they attacked, they assimilated in the community, and they played a game of make believe and conned all those around them that they were good community members, not community destroyers.

Life has changed, little seems certain. Some cultural groups are isolated by vigilantes, counter attacks are entertained, and retribution begins.

Within this context, nine million residents try and pick up the pieces of their lives. Parents search for the words to explain their children's questions: lost loved ones have not been recovered from the attack site, what is now referred to as Ground Zero. Some families whose husbands, wives, sons and daughters were murdered do not have human remains to bury, some are lucky if a finger is recovered, perhaps a skull fragment. DNA testing helps with the identification in a few, so few, recoveries.

When schools reopen there is the painful duty of processing this horrible incident with children who witnessed the events first hand, many of whom are traumatized by the terrorism, as are their teachers. In other workplaces, employee absenteeism is high. For those who go back to work, concentration is low, motivation is lagging, but the need to take one's mind off the incident is strong. The city supports programs which will help residents talk openly about the day, which will help them air their fears and their grief. The arts become important experiences for the community as they process their loss.

Applied theatre work is commissioned where artists generate scenarios and create opportunities for the community to respond to their pain through the theatre work. In a local elementary school children tell their stories of how it was for them to witness these events firsthand from their classroom window. They render their stories into dramatic form. Play texts are written which serve as catalysts for discussion and for further theatre work. Audiences who observe this work share their own stories in post-performance workshops. The theatre becomes a way for the community to examine their own relationship to the shocking events of the attack. In this new form of community theatre, people can directly apply the art form to assist in their own reconstruction of identity. This community theatre is vital to the process of healing, and enables the people to share their narratives of pain and hope.

The community theatre is an applied theatre where individuals connect with and support one another, and where opportunities are provided for groups to voice who they are and what they aspire to become. The applied theatre becomes a medium through which the storytellers can step into the perspectives of others and gain entry points to different worldviews, perspectives which might even articulate why the events of that day of barbarity might have occurred. This theatre shares much in common with other theatre movements where the art form is central to storytelling, to healing, to teaching and learning. Participatory theatre, interactive theatre, theatre in education, theatre of the oppressed, community theatre, outreach theatre, theatre for development, all are interested with the applications of a reflective theatre, a theatre which is concerned with

facilitating dialogue on who we are and what we aspire to become. In the words of Michael Rodd:

> The theatre allows us to converse with our souls—to passionately pursue and discover ways of living with ourselves and others. We are all artists, and theatre is a language. We have no better way to work together, to learn about each other, to heal and to grow (xix).

Applied Theatre Teaches Us to Teach Others

On the other side of the world, in a rural township two hundred miles from the closest urban center, another community is suffering a crisis, a different version of Ground Zero. Unemployment is depressingly high with many adults disenchanted by their desperate and frustrating search for work, work which doesn't exist. Alarming increases in anti-depressant medication especially among young males is occurring. Domestic violence has reached staggering proportions and incidences of physical and verbal harassment are at an all-time high. Single parented families are common and notions of a regular household income are laughable. Families live from day to day, week to week, dependent on assistance from social security and other outreach services.

Drug and alcohol abuse is a virtual industry among young people. In this particular community, suicide, especially teenage suicide, is seen a positive solution to life's problems. Government departments have directed their officers in health, housing and

education programs to prioritize community initiatives which combat directly how suicide could be seen as the only alternative. Tension between the various cultural groups is endemic, hate crime is common, a sense of isolationism is pervasive. Crime rates are up, there are few public recreation facilities for young people, school drop out rates are serious. Yes, life within this community is grim and seems to hold little prospects for a secure and stable future, what many others, those before Ground Zero, came to expect as their birthright.

Within this context, a theatre troupe has been commissioned to help the community begin a conversation about what is possible and not. Funds are being directed to support dialogue, and to activate community members to converse with each other and problem solve what, if anything, they can directly do to intervene in healing the dislocation, especially for the young people. The task for this particular troupe is a challenge: to create participatory theatreforms where young and adult people can begin to process how they feel about the world in which they live and, further, to interrogate what is possible for them to change in their own lives, what is not possible, and how they can build together a community which is not powered by fractured, violent and oppressive encounters.

Applied Theatre helps communities' process issues which directly impact upon them.

I am likening this community work which embraces theatre as a necessary imperative to transforming human behavior as an applied theatre. Applied theatre is not simply a

presentational medium that occurs within a conventional mainstream theatre house, but a theatre which is taken out into non-theatrical settings, community centers, parks and streets, prison and rehabilitation venues, therapy and health sites, housing projects, the support services, and other locations, for the purposes of helping the audience, or the participants, to grapple with an issue, event or question which is of immediate public and personal concern.

It is an applied theatre because the art form becomes a transformative agent which places the audience or participants in direct and immediate situations where they can witness, confront and de-construct aspects of their own and others' actions. The applied theatre is committed to the power of the aesthetic form for raising awareness of how we are situated in this world and what we as individuals and as communities might do to make our world a better place.

Applied Theatre Heightens Awareness

The applied theatre is powered by a need to change: a community is hurting and theatre can enable them process their hurt; or, there are too many unnecessary acts of disease, of hate, of substance abuse in our midst, and theatre might be one way for a community to consider the alternatives. Applied theatre opens up new perspectives, poses options, and anticipates change.

The term applied theatre has been gathering increasing momentum in recent years. Institutions of higher learning across the world, but most especially in Australia, England and the United States have simultaneously designed applied theatre degree programs and research centers dedicated to investigating the question: How can theatre be harnessed in non-theatrical settings when building stronger communities? The applied theatre became a particularly useful description given that it encompasses the breadth of work where theatre was being created inside and outside of educational settings, and mostly in non-theatrical environments, for the diverse purposes of raising awareness, posing alternatives, healing psychological wounds or barriers, challenging contemporary discourses, and voicing the views of the silent and marginal. Five brief examples will highlight this diversity.

Raising awareness

In the twenty-first century, HiV still continues to plague the globe, and is especially rampant in what we sometimes call the third world countries. In these communities, it can be difficult to find the means to educate on safe sex practices or to help raise awareness about the disease and how it can be prevented. In what is now widely referred to as the theatre for development movement, many theatre troupes have been commissioned or driven to create participatory theatre works where information concerning life and death issues can be relayed effectively. Drawing on traditions of storytelling and narrative discourses, these troupes engage theatre as the principal event for heightening understanding on Aids, HiV and safe sex.

In other settings, street performances become important informally staged events for interrogating unjust political policies, such as those which actively promote exclusion of certain cultural groups; or budgetary reductions in fiscal affairs, such as cuts to arts organizations, to social and health services. Invisible or legislative theatre is but one response to this movement where events are staged without audiences necessarily knowing that they are witnessing a theatrical moment. A theatre program focused on government cutbacks in health services to minorities might be staged in public centers like shopping malls, trains, libraries, churches. Here actors might create a lively exchange between a government official and an individual directly affected by the cutback. The actors attempt to engage the audience, the observers, in the exchange. The actors raise the issue and canvass the varied positions, but they highlight how the proposed cutback will adversely impact upon a given population. The audience is unaware until the end of the presentation that they are watching a fictional event. The program is motivated by activism and the need to address issues of discrimination, inequity and isolation.

Posing alternatives

In a coastal town where sun and beach feature in promotional materials, there is a large young male population disaffected from school, their families, their community, themselves. A health services department in this town is at a loss to know what to do to help these young men. A theatre company is asked to create an applied theatre project whereby positive role models are presented and examined. The intention of the applied

theatre is to help social workers find and examine strategies for effectively dealing with young people in crisis situations.

The company creates the following scenario: *Mel is fifteen years old. He is the oldest male in his family now that his father has left home. He has a younger sister who looks upto him, yet she is a source of annoyance to Mel. Mel's mother is not coping as a single parent. She barely manages to pay the bills and she takes her anxieties out on her son. Mel is losing interest in school and his friends. He raids his mother's liquor cabinet. There are suggestions that he might cause himself physical harm if this pattern continues.*

The scenario is presented to the social workers whom I'll refer to as the participants. They consider how Mel is adapting to his changed life circumstances and whether he has alternatives to the dangerous self-destructive pathway he seems to be on. The social workers are presented with situations from Mel's life. These provide some context as to how he is interacting with his world. The participants hot seat Mel and play out situations that might occur between him and a social worker. These situations are examined. Do the social workers questions seem appropriate? How is Mel responding during the encounter? How might we change this encounter so that the social worker could be more supportive? The role-play becomes a vehicle for dialogue among the social workers. They consider issues related to language, nuance, gesture and how important these are when faced by young people in Mel's situation.

This scenario becomes an applied theatre project which is aimed at enabling the social workers to consider the variety of alternatives and options at their disposal as they interact with Mel. Mel becomes a representative of those young people in varying states of crisis or alienation. The situation is a delicate one which requires tact and sensitivity. The participants in this program seek strategies for helping young people like Mel. Mel becomes the catalyst, the protagonist, for exploring issues focused on identity, acceptance and marginalization.

We are seeing increasing numbers of projects of this type being sponsored by health, housing and rehabilitation departments, departments more interested in the power of theatre as a resource for social welfare workers, youth detainment officers, counselors, and others who are interested in the capacity of communities to effect change in the lives of people who seem out of sorts with themselves and their world.

Healing psychological wounds or barriers

A group of fifth graders (10-11 year olds) witness a major terrorist catastrophe from their classroom window, the sudden collapse of the Twin Towers at the World Trade Center in New York City. A drama therapist is commissioned to work with these children over some weeks, to help them share their stories and their fears from witnessing this event firsthand. Through the conversations and role-plays between the children and the therapist, they create a play based on their words and thoughts, a theatre event which helps them interrogate their anxieties.

While this event involves a public presentation for parents and members of the school community, this presentational aspect, for the therapist, is less important than the process of the children's articulating what they saw on that terrible day. For the therapist, it is the non-presentational aspect of the work where the children use theatre to share how they are coping now, and to express the challenges for them as they begin to rebuild their school community which is the priority.

Nonetheless, in the discussion following the presentation, parents, members of the wider community and general audience members commented on how this presentation provided some relief and release from their own anxieties. It was a healing process for this audience, to observe this work and share their stories.

The presentation by these children became part of a wider healing process. This project has the characteristics of the applied theatre. Work of this nature can have a therapeutic quality which aims to rebuild a fracture, a scarring. Applied theatre is now part of the armor of those professions concerned with processing trauma, grief and loss. For instance, there is an established drama therapy movement concerned with using theatre strategies to help individuals and groups deal with a range of personal dislocations from society. In a society where there appears to be a frightful occurrence of child sex crime, youth prostitution, gang rape, and other shocking abuses of power and privilege, the theatre can be applied in the rebuilding and the healing of those in need. As well, applied theatre has been used in marriage therapy, and to help with fractured parent-child relationships, and

other complex issues which generate a range of emotional and psychological stresses. We are seeing increasing uses of applied theatre in prisons, encounter groups, alcohol and drug abuse centers, retreats of all kinds including social and business settings.

Challenging contemporary discourses

A shocking hate crime occurs in a quiet remote country center, the brutal beating of the twenty-one year old and gay Matthew Shepard by two local young men. A director and playwright are struck by this event and wonder whether this crime and the attitudes that motivated it are representational of a larger public trend. The circumstances surrounding this particular attack are especially troublesome. The two men who murdered Shepard engaged Matthew in a friendly conversation in a bar and then leave with him in their pick up truck. They drive with Shepard to a remote location, drag him from their vehicle, tie him to a fence, where they kick and bludgeon him to death. Their intention it seems was to kill him from their first meeting because he was openly gay. Their friendliness in the bar was a scam, a lure to get him into their truck. The murderers act out a role of the friend so that they can entice the unknowing victim to his execution.

"Look like th' innocent flower," exclaims Lady Macbeth, "but be the serpent under 't." (Shakespeare, I.v:66-67). Just as Lady Macbeth urges her husband to act out a loyal role with King Duncan while secretively plotting to kill him, the history of humankind, it seems, is replete with such duplicitous acts. The Nazis who played music as their captors were led to the gas chambers; the pedophiles who seduce young boys with gifts and other

supposed acts of goodness; the fanatics who enter bars and restaurants on the pretence of entertainment while having strapped dynamite around their chests. The world of make believe can be powered by a deadly sense of purpose.

What motivates hate? How can people commit such horrible crimes? How is it possible for the brutal beating of people like Matthew Shepard and others to occur? The applied theatre is but one forum where these issues can be raised and considered. In the Shepard example, the playwright contemplates whether theatre can play a role in interrogating what leads to hate such as those attacks fuelled by homophobia. He joins all of those artists concerned with probing why injustices and oppressions occur. How might theatre open up a dialogue about why certain groups in society feel privileged and superior? What leads humanity to want to segregate and annihilate? What is there about the human spirit that wants to build a future through opposition and difference?

In the Shepard example, the dramatist applied the theatreform to critique contemporary mainstream discourses, discourses often powered by the oppression of minorities and of those who live in the margins. He visited and interviewed residents of the community where the hate crime took place and generates a theatre text based on these interviews. These interviews demonstrate a complex range of viewpoints about Shepard and how residents viewed his lifestyle. The narratives exposed through these interviews are rendered into a dramatic text. This text is performed in a number of locations, including the site where the crime happened. It generates considerable conversation on the kind of world in which we live and that which we want to create. The applied theatre assumes a

significant public service enabling communities to talk freely about their own and others' perceptions and values[1].

Voicing the views of the silent and marginal.

As part of the activities during Domestic Violence Week in a small rural town an applied theatre work is designed for women who may or may not be victims of domestic violence. All live in a community and on a housing project where there has been an alarming rise in reports of domestic violence. The government department responsible for administering the housing project has decided that a theatre project focused upon domestic violence could be an important supplement to its' activities. A theatre group has been asked to create a participatory program where women can begin to process how a community might deal with this issue. If women experience domestic violence what options do they have in their home environment?

Following a field trip to the housing project, the theatre workers wrote a scene between two characters, Man and Woman where it is suggested that Woman is a silent victim of gradual and vicious incidents of beating by her male partner. This scene hinted at many of the questions that victims/survivors of domestic violence had raised to the theatre workers on their field trip. How can women remove themselves from violent situations when they are so dependent on their partners? What steps can be taken to prevent physical and verbal attacks in their home? Why do the perpetrators of domestic violence

[1]This playwright referred to is Moises Kaufman and the text, *The Laramie Project.*

need to control the victims/survivors? It would be the scene between Man and Woman which would serve as the basis for a series of participatory activities where the audience would interrogate the options open to the victim/survivor of domestic violence.

The female audience is provided with opportunities to hot seat the woman protagonist, they go into role as her friend or confidant, they provide advice, they grapple with the contradictions and the ambiguities of this woman's life. What are the dilemmas that Woman faces? What choices does she really have in this situation? Through their various interventions the audience begins a dialogue on what life choices are available for women in crisis situations. They debate the merits of a particular strategy or approach which victims/survivors of domestic violence might pursue. The implications of these strategies are examined by the audience.

This applied theatre project generates a fruitful inquiry into what happens when domestic violence is experienced in the home. It aims to place participants within a dramatic situation where they must speak up and be counted. At the close of this particular program educational materials are available where those who want to find out further about the subject can seek help and guidance. The applied theatre project is sustained by a belief that theatre can be an important tool for enabling victims/survivors to voice their views. The marginalized can be heard, but they need assistance when considering their life options.

In each of the above examples it is the applications of the theatrical art form which are being harnessed to help communities interrogate some aspect of who they are and what they aspire to become. Whether these applications are aimed at facilitating a dialogue, or healing a pain, or processing a specific issue of significant importance within a community, the theatre is the platform which empowers a transformation.

The applied theatre launches participants into virtual worlds where they can experience and interrogate what is possible and what is not within the confines of one's life project. This theatreform enables communities to grapple with issues related to identity, social change, human development and healing, and what it means to live together during difficult, uncertain and even stressful times. The theatre is an applied art form because it is through and in the theatrical experience where these issues can be most immediately addressed. Rather than talk about the issues, participants experience them firsthand as they encounter fictional and sometimes real characters that grapple with what it means to live in this new century.

The theatre is applied because it is taken out from the conventional mainstream theatre house into different communities in various settings, where many of its members have no great experience in theatreform. The theatre becomes a medium for action, for reflection, but, most importantly, for transformation; a theatre where new modes of being can be encountered, and where new possibilities for humankind imagined.

References

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